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RUEHKT/AMEMBASSY KATHMANDU PRIORITY 9298
RUEHEK/AMEMBASSY BISHKEK PRIORITY 0055
RUEHDBU/AMEMBASSY DUSHANBE PRIORITY
RUEHCI/AMCONSUL KOLKATA PRIORITY 0934
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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 02 DHAKA 001594

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E.O. 12958: DECL: 09/30/2017

TAGS: PGOV PHUM PREL BG

SUBJECT: ELECTION COMMISSION AGREES TO OBSERVATION OF
REGISTRATION PROCESS

REF: DHAKA 1569

Classified By: Charge d'Affaires a.i. Geeta Pasi, reason 1.4(d)

¶1. (SBU) SUMMARY. Voter registration is progressing as the Election Commission expands its activities to additional areas of the country. The Commission, with assistance from the United Nations Development Program (UNDP), has solved the most immediate problem -- procuring 8,000 laptops for local registration officials. After pressing by Deputy Assistant Secretary of State John Gastright during his visit to Dhaka,

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the Election Commissioners agreed to consider internationally-supported domestic observation of the voter registration process on a trial basis. END SUMMARY.

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VOTER REGISTRATION CONTINUES APACE
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¶2. (SBU) According to the Election Commission and UNDP, voter registration for the new photo voter list is progressing on schedule, if not a bit ahead of schedule, in several areas throughout the country. Over 1.6 million people have been registered since the launch of the pilot project in Sreepur in June. According to Chief Election Commissioner ATM Shamsul Huda, registration officials continue to streamline the registration process, and have already successfully shaved one to two minutes off the time it takes to register an individual. (NOTE: With up to 90 million eligible voters, each minute shaved off the time it takes to register one voter has the potential to save months of work.)

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PROCUREMENT SETBACK RESOLVED
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¶3. (SBU) The project will ramp up considerably once the Election Commission takes possession of 8,000 additional laptop computers. Currently, registration is taking place using the original 500 laptops from the Sreepur pilot, plus approximately 200 additional computers donated by private companies.

¶4. (SBU) The initial attempt by the Election Commission to procure the 8,000 laptops via public tender failed after one bidder, suspecting it might lose the competition, filed a pre-emptive grievance against the process. After it became

clear the adjudication of the grievance would delay the purchase of the laptops by several months, the Commission opted to cancel the procurement. Instead, UNDP agreed to procure the laptops through its existing procurement mechanisms, with funding from donors supporting the photo voter list project, to keep the project on schedule. On September 26, the first 2,000 UNDP-procured laptops arrived in country. The rest are expected in the next two to three weeks.

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ELECTIONS "BY THE END OF 2008, IF NOT EARLIER"
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15. (SBU) At a reception on September 25 held to celebrate the initial success of the voter registration project, Chief Election Commissioner Huda spoke confidently of the progress being made on voter registration. He emphasized the complexity of the undertaking, and noted that a few months ago he was "cautiously hopeful" about holding elections by the end of 2008. Given the progress with the voter registration drive, however, he said he now believes "we shall surely hold elections by the end of 2008, if not earlier." The same day, Chief Advisor Fakhruddin Ahmed repeated the possibility of earlier elections while speaking to the press on an official visit to New York to attend the United Nations General Assembly meeting.

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COMMISSION STILL NOT EAGER FOR MONITORING BY DOMESTIC NGO'S...
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16. (SBU) On September 27, Embassy and USAID officers, along with representatives from the International Republican Institute (IRI) and National Democratic Institute (NDI), met

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with the Election Commission to discuss the issue of observation of the voter registration process. Huda and the other two Commissioners had earlier raised objections to having local non-governmental organizations (NGOs) observe the process, claiming they are a "disruptive presence" and are politically biased. As a result, the Commission initially refused to agree to permit the local election monitoring organization JANIPOL, which IRI trains and supports, from observing the registration process. In a meeting with SCA Deputy Assistant Secretary of State John Gastright on September 18, however, the Commissioners agreed to sit down with the Embassy and discuss the issue in more detail. (Reftel).

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...BUT AGREED TO RE-CONSIDER
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17. (SBU) In the September 27 meeting, the Commissioners again raised their concerns about the usefulness of independent observation, the alleged poor quality of NGO field staff, and perceived political biases within the NGOs. They also said observers' presence in the registration centers made the workers there "nervous." Chief Election Commissioner Huda said the Commission needed more time to conduct "investigations" of the NGOs' field staff, citing the concerns of political parties about perceptions of bias. Huda did say the Commission would welcome international observers, however.

18. (C) After a long discussion in which USAID and IRI explained the positive role domestic observation could play in the process, the Commissioners agreed to allow some limited monitoring as a test case. IRI offered to follow up on any specific concern regarding individuals working for JANIPOL, and IRI and JANIPOL were requested to submit a proposal to the Commission that includes their methodology, scope, and expected results.

¶9. (SBU) The meeting focused discussion on JANIPOP. When NDI mentioned its intended work with political parties on party reform, Huda and the other Commissioners said they welcomed any assistance.

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COMMENT: STILL ON TRACK

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¶10. (C) COMMENT: The voter registration process has so far been a greater success than expected. Nevertheless, challenges remain -- in particular, when the government tries to expands the operation later this fall. The Election Commission's willingness to reconsider its opposition to observation of the registration process by domestic NGOs is significant. It now appears the technical component of preparing the elections is ahead of the political dimension, particularly the challenge of convincing the political parties to take part in polls with their leaders behind bars.

END COMMENT.

Pasi